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# 'Plumbers' and 'cowboys' inside the White House

WASHINGTON — America is lucky that it produces men like Lt. Col. Oliver North. His title is deputy director for political-military affairs of the National Security Council. His job is secret missions for the White House.

He carries it out with the gung-ho spirit that won him a Silver Star as a Marine platoon leader in Vietnam. While State and Defense department officials hold conferences to discuss policy options, he is out there somewhere acting — as in the arms-for-hostages exercise with Iran — on the implied instructions of his president.

The nation needs men of action. A former White House aide is quoted as "jokingly" calling Colonel North "the Reagan administration's answer to G. Gordon Liddy," another man of action. The comparison is imprecise, because Liddy was tried and sent to prison for his role in Richard Nixon's notorious "plumbers" unit during the reign of lawlessness summed up by the word "Watergate."

Yet there are parallels between the unorthodox operations in Mr. Nixon's time and those going on in the Reagan White House.

They begin with the same root causes: frustration with Congress and the bureaucracy; distrust not only of professional bureaucrats, but of the highest officials in line departments; fear of "leaks" that might disclose and so derail secret projects.

The close circle in the Nixon White House could not get enough CIA and FBI cooperation in its effort to plug what it considered damaging leaks of national security information. So it created "the plumbers," a unit based in the Executive Office Building next door, whose agents included E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy.

## U.S.A.



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Among its offenses was breaking into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, Mr. Ellsberg being the man suspected of leaking the "Pentagon papers" to the press. Its activities spread and overlapped with undercover missions carried out by staffers of CREEP — the Committee to Re-Elect the President — including the burgling of Democratic Party offices at the Watergate.

Before and after those adventures, there was wholesale wiretapping, and talk of lie-detector tests. Asked what was going on when eventually the tip of this sublegal iceberg broke the surface, the White House tried to repel questioners with claims of national security.

No one has suggested a substantive resemblance between what the Watergate gang did then and what the Reagan White House's operatives are doing now. The center of current controversy is the National Security Council, specifically focused on foreign relations. As far as we

know now, there is no domestic side to these intrigues.

But they proceed from the same frustration, mistrust and fear that drove the Nixon crew, compounded by impatience with legal limits on the executive branch in affairs abroad.

The national security adviser's office was set up originally to coordinate information for the president to aid his decision-making in the areas of defense and foreign affairs. In the nearly 40 years since, depending on who headed it, it has swung between paper-shuffling and policy-setting.

Under Mr. Reagan, since Congress has required that the Central Intelligence Agency report all its major excursions to congressional intelligence committees, the national security office has become a mini-CIA. It has carried out secret operations, including some that leapfrogged law and policy, without the burden of reporting to Congress.

It was involved in arranging arms shipments to the Nicaraguan "contras" after Congress refused to permit such shipments officially. It has planned anti-terrorist moves such as intercepting the Achille Lauro hijackers and bombing Libya. It initiated the "disinformation" campaign against Libya that put Washington in a flap earlier this fall.

And even while the State Department urged others not to send arms to Iran or deal with terrorists, the national security office carried out the secret scheme to swap arms to Iran for liberation of U.S. hostages in Lebanon.

Interestingly, the action group that executes most of these missions, part of a special crisis-management team, is nicknamed "the cowboys." Its star agent is Oliver North. Like "the plumbers" of recent memory, it is quartered in the ornate old Executive Office Building beside the White House.

Some such parallels between then and now are mere coincidence. Others — the atmosphere out of which the two ventures grew, the demonstrated danger of operations hidden from oversight — are more than that.